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REVENGE OF THE BARBARIAN

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ABOUT THE
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NOREM

Stan Lee presents

A MARVEL COMICS SUPER SPECIAL FEATURING THE SAVAGE SWORD of CONAN™

Table of Contents

THE HYBORIAN AGE OF CONAN (MAP) 4

REVENGE OF THE BARBARIAN 7
A tale of timeless terror in a nameless land, as Conan stands alone against savages, buccaneers, and a monster older than the Pyramids.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND CONAN 58
From Robert E. Howard till today.

CONAN OF THE CINEMA 63
At last! The Cimmerian on film! And guess who's bringing his amazing exploits to the movie audience!

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THE HYBORIAN AGE OF CONAN

N
W
E
S

Western Sea

Baracha Isles

Isle of the Black Ones

VANAHEIM

AESIR

HYPERBOREA

CIMMERIA

PICTISH WILDERNESS

BORDER KIDOM

BRYTHUNIA

NEMED

Belus

Gunderland

Galparan

Tauran

Tanasul

AQUILONIA

Tarantia

BLACK RIVER

Bossonian Marches

SHIRKI RIVER

THUNDER R.

KHORATUS RIVER

Poitain

ZINGARA

ARGOS

Messantia

CORINTHIA

ZAMORA

Shadizar

OPHIR

KHAURAN

KOTH

KHORAJA

Nomads

Meadow Cities

SHEM

RIVER STYX

Khemi

STYGIA

Sukhmet

KUSH

IRFAR

KESHAN

PUNT

Xuthal

ZARKHEBA R.

Ghoti

Grasslands

Jack Kingdoms

ZEMBABWEI

Kuthchemes

Zanboula

Deserts

Tundas

Deserts

Steppes

TURAN

Vilayet Sea

Aghrapur

Xapur

HYRKANIA

To KHITAI

ZAPOROSKA RIVER

Ft. Ghori

To VENDHYA

Know, O prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars - Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west.

Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet."

The Nemedian Chronicles

Following the adventure chronicled as "The Slithering Shadow," Conan joins and remains for a time with the dreaded Barachan Pirates, who assault the Hyborian world from a chain of islands off the coast of Zingara....

ROBERT E. HOWARD'S
CONAN
THE CIMMERIAN
THE MORNING SUN'S HEAT HAS NOT YET BECOME FIERCE WHEN CONAN STAGGERS OUT OF THE COCKATOO'S CABIN, FLAGON OF WINE IN HIS BRONZED BRAWNY HAND.
BOOTED LEGS WIDE, HE TEETERS SLIGHTLY TO THE GENTLE ROLLING OF HIS SHIP IN THE LIGHT BUT STEADY BREEZE.
HE IS NOT SURPRISED TO FIND THAT HE IS THE ONLY MAN STANDING AT ALL...
REVENGE OF THE BARBARIAN
FREELY ADAPTED FROM "BLACK VULMER'S VENGEANCE" BY ROBERT E. HOWARD
ROY THOMAS
WRITER / EDITOR
JOHN BUSCEMA AND ALFREDO ALCALA
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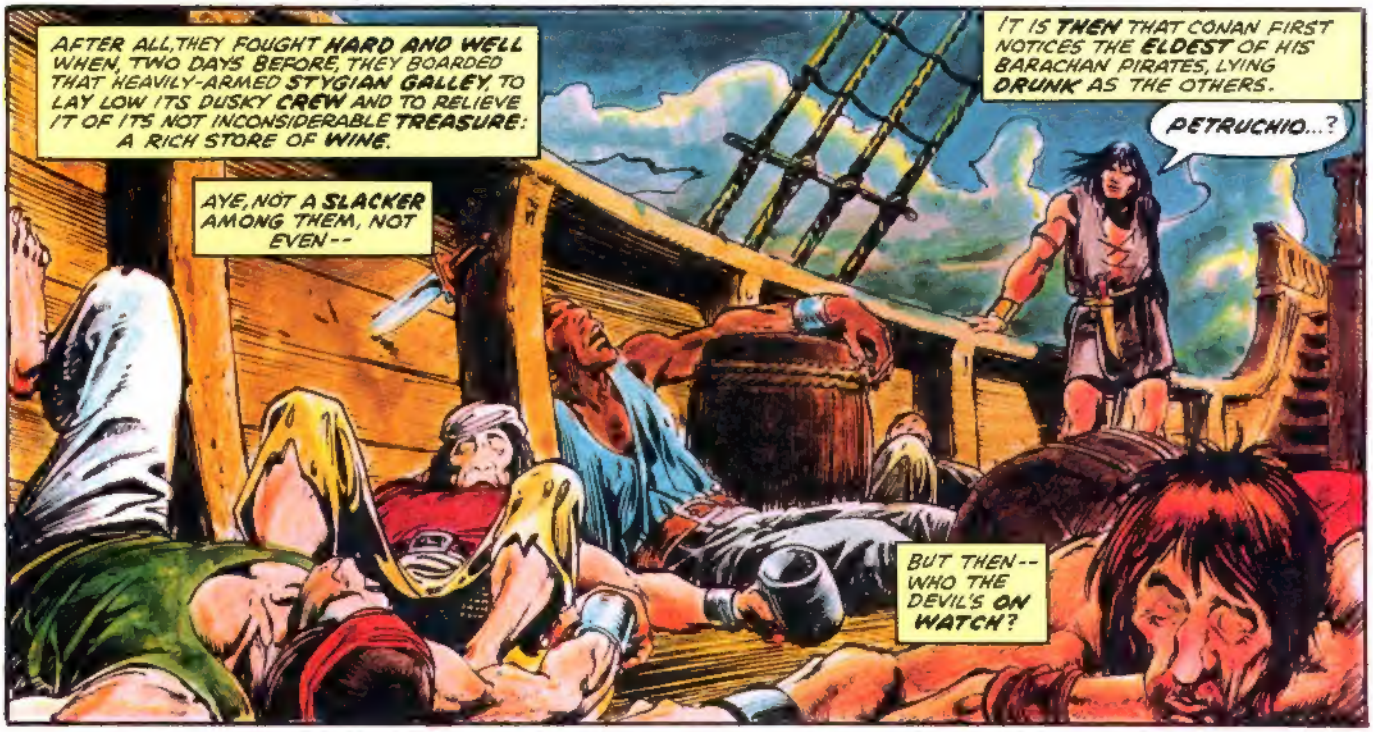
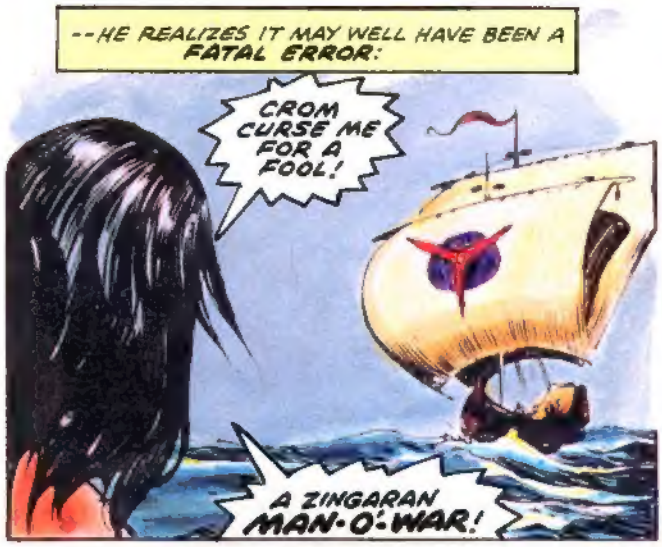
JOE ROSEN
LETTERER

...AS HE RECALLS FULLY THE **DRUNKEN DEBAUCH** WHICH BEGAN TWO NIGHTS AGO, AND WHICH IS ONLY NOW **PETERING OUT.**

WELL, LET THE BOYS **HAVE** THEIR REST, HE MUSES...


AFTER ALL, THEY FOUGHT **HARD AND WELL** WHEN, TWO DAYS BEFORE, THEY BOARDED THAT HEAVILY-ARMED **STYGIAN GALLEY,** TO LAY LOW ITS DUSKY **CREW** AND TO RELIEVE IT OF ITS NOT INCONSIDERABLE **TREASURE:** A RICH STORE OF **WINE.**
AYE, NOT A **SLACKER** AMONG THEM, NOT EVEN--
IT IS **THEN** THAT CONAN FIRST NOTICES THE **ELDEST** OF HIS BARACHAN PIRATES, LYING **DRUNK** AS THE OTHERS.
PETRUCHIO...?
BUT THEN-- WHO THE DEVIL'S **ON WATCH?**

THE **ANSWER** RESOUNDS LIKE A **THUNDERCLAP** IN HIS SUDDENLY ALERT **MIND:**
NO ONE!
AND, EVEN AS HE STARES WIDE-EYED AND UNBELIEVING OVER THE COCKATOO'S **LARBOARD SIDE--**



ALL HANDS TO BATTLE-QUARTERS!
ONLY REVERBERANT SNORES ANSWER HIS STRIDENT SUMMONS...
...AS ALL HANDS REMAIN PRECISELY AS THEY WERE.
DAMN YOUR DRUNKEN SOULS!
STRIKE YOUR COLORS, PIRATE!
SURRENDER YOUR SWORD-- AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED!
YOU GO TO HELL-- AND TAKE THE KING OF ZINGARA WITH YOU!!
NO MORE BANTERING OF EMPTY WORDS NOW, AS COLD STEEL BLADES GLEAM IN THE RISING SUN...
...AND THE GRIM GODDESS DEATH LOOKS DOWN ON A SCENE TO WARM HER COAL-BLACK HEART!

OBJECTS WAVER DIZZILY BEFORE THE CIMMERIAN'S BLOODSHOT EYES...
YET, HIS SWORD-ARM IS NEARLY AS STRONG AND TRUE AS EVER.

MAN AFTER MAN OF THE ZINGARANS FALLS BEFORE EITHER BROADSWORD OR POINTED DAGGER...

BUT THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF MEN IN ZINGARA, OR ON THE BUCCANEER SHIPS WHICH SAIL FROM THAT LAND TO PLY THE BROAD WESTERN OCEAN...

AND PERHAPS IT IS THE DEATH-GODDESS' SENSE OF IRONY WHICH LETS THE REELING ONCE-BARBARIAN EVADE EVERY LETHAL SWEEP OF AN ENEMY BUCCANEER'S BLADE--

--ONLY TO FALL BEFORE A HASTILY-GRABBED PLANK FROM HIS OWN GORE-WASHED DECK--!
GGAAAA

LATER: DOM CASTILLIUS, CAPTAIN OF THE WEST WOLF, SETS DOWN HIS WINE-GLASS WITH A GESTURE WHICH, IN ANOTHER MAN, WOULD SMACK OF AFFECTATION...
BRING IN THE PRISONER!
AYE, CAP'N... BUT WATCH YOURSELF, I PRAY!
HE'S A WILD ONE, THIS CONAN OF THE BARACHANS...
...A BARBARIAN ORIGINALLY FROM THE NORTHERN WASTES, I'VE HEARD TELL...
...AND EVEN CHAINS HAVEN'T TAKEN ALL THE DEFIANCE OUT OF HIM!
SO I SEE.
SO...YOU ARE CONAN, THE NOTORIOUS BARACHAN PIRATE.
I AM CONAN.
AND I SUPPOSE YOU'LL SAY YOU'RE NOT A PIRATE-- THAT YOU ARE ACTUALLY IN THE SERVICE OF THE KING OF ARGOS--
--THAT BLASPHEMOUS ROGUE WHO TURNS A BLIND EYE WHILE YOU BARACHANS RAID ALL SHIPPING EXCEPT THE ARGOSSEANS'?
SAVE YOUR BREATH! I'M NO HYPOCRITE LIKE YOU, TO SERVE ZINGARA'S KING WHILE HIDING BEHIND THE NAME OF BUCCANEER.
I'M A PIRATE!
I'VE PLUNDERED ARGOSSEAN SHIPS AS WELL AS STYGIAN OR ZINGARAN--
SO BE DAMNED TO YOU, HERON-BEAK!
AMUSING! STILL, IF YOU KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT THOSE OF US CALLED BUCCANEERS--
--THEN YOU DOUBTLESS KNOW I'VE THE AUTHORITY TO HANG YOU OUT OF HAND!
YOU NEED NO AUTHORITY TO DO ANYTHING, THIS FAR OUT OF SIGHT OF LAND!

BESIDES, THIS ISN'T THE FIRST TIME OUR TRAILS HAVE CROSSED, DOM CASTILLIUS--ALIAS BASQUS THE BUTCHER!
WHAT? EXPLAIN YOURSELF!
GLADLY...
"WHO ON THE HYBORIAN COAST HAS NOT HEARD OF BASQUS THE BUTCHER--
"--WHOSE SOLDIERS SLAUGHTERED MEN, WOMEN, EVEN CHILDREN A FEW YEARS BACK, WHEN THE ZINGARAN PROVINCE OF NISPAN REVOLTED?
"AS IT HAPPENED, I RODE THRU NOT FAR BEHIND YOUR KILLERS...
"...AND A DYING NISPANER PAINTED ME A CLEAR PICTURE OF YOUR LOOKS BEFORE HE DIED.
YOU ARE GUESSING, BARACHAN! ALL MEN KNOW THAT THIS BASQUS OF WHOM YOU SPEAK DIED SOME TIME AGO IN SOME UNKNOWN LAND...!
AYE, SUPPOSEDLY DIED--BECAUSE THE REST OF ZINGARA CAME TO HATE HIS NAME AS MUCH AS THE MEN OF NISPAN!
ZINGARA'S KING HAD USE FOR YOU, THOUGH, AND GAVE YOU A NEW NAME--EVEN A COMMISSION OF SORTS--
"--SO YOU'D GO ON DOING HIS DIRTY WORK, ONLY NOW ON THE HIGH SEAS, WHERE NONE WOULD LIVE TO TELL THE TALE!
"BUT ONE OF YOUR OWN CONFIDANTS LATER DESERTED YOU AND CAME AMONG US OF THE BARACHAN ISLES.
"HIS DESCRIPTION OF YOU WAS SO CLOSE TO THE DYING NISPANER'S THAT I HAD FEW DOUBTS YOU WERE BASQUS...
...AND I'VE NONE, NOW THAT I'VE SEEN YOU!
I'LL NOT STOOP EVEN TO ANSWER YOUR MAD ACCUSATIONS, PIRATE.
YOU KILLED SEVEN OF MY MEN.
WHAT OF IT? YOU'VE HAD YOUR MEN KILL ALL OF MINE!
POOR DEVILS! THEY'LL WAKE UP IN HELL WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING HOW THEY GOT THERE.

CONAN HAS PLAYED IT CAREFULLY:

AS HE'S TOLD HIS STORY, HE'S EDGED IN CLOSER TO THE BUCCANEER. A MOMENT MORE, AND THEY WILL DIE TOGETHER... A MOMENT MORE...!

WHAT'S THE CATCH, DOG?

YOU'RE A BRAVE ROGUE, CONAN.

I MIGHT SPARE YOUR LIFE... EVEN LET YOU JOIN MY CREW.

WHERE IS THE FABLED TREASURE-TROVE OF THE INFAMOUS BLOODRAVEN?

AHH... GOOD OLD CAP'N BLOODRAVEN! DEAD THESE MANY YEARS, AND STILL YOU ZINGARANS HUNT FOR THAT LAST BIG HAUL HE TOOK FROM A ROYAL SHIP OUT OF KORDAVO!

WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHERE IT IS, EITHER-- OR EVEN IF IT TRULY EXISTS...

BUT IF IT'S TREASURE YOU WANT, I CAN SHOW YOU A HOARD TO MAKE HIS LOOK LIKE A PEAT-POOL BESIDE THE SEA OF VILAYET!

YOU INTEREST ME AT LAST. SAY ON, PIRATE.

AYE...

"TEN DAYS' SAIL FROM HERE, THERE'S A NAMELESS BAY ON THE BLACK COAST.

"FOUR YEARS AGO, THE BARACHAN PIRATE BLACK ROJ AND I ANCHORED THERE, IN QUEST OF A HOARD OF ANCIENT JEWELS CALLED THE TALONS OF DAGON.

"A SAVAGE BORN THEREABOUTS SWORE HE HAD FOUND THE LEGENDARY GEMS IN A RUINED TEMPLE INLAND.

"SUPERSTITIOUS FEAR KEPT HIM FROM HELPING HIMSELF...

"BUT, FOR A PRICE, HE WAS WILLING TO GUIDE US THERE.

"BOTH OUR CREWS MARCHED INLAND, NEITHER TRUSTING THE OTHER...

"...TILL AT LAST WE FOUND THE CRUMBLING REMAINS OF AN OLD CITY...

"...AND DON'T BOTHER LOOKING FOR IT ON ANY OF YOUR ZINGARAN MAPS!

"THERE, BENEATH AN ANCIENT, BROKEN ALTAR...
"...WE FOUND THE JEWELS -- BIG AS HENS' EGGS THEY WERE, MAKING A QUIVERING FIRE ABOUT THE TOPPLED SHRINE.
"BY CROM, THE SIGHT OF THEM WAS ENOUGH TO MADDEN A MAN...
AND, INDEED, THAT'S JUST WHAT IT DID!
WE CAMPED THERE FOR THE NIGHT -- AND, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, WE FELL OUT OVER THE DIVISION OF THE SPOIL, EVEN THOUGH THERE WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE EVERY MAN OF US RICH FOR LIFE.
AND, WHILE WE FOUGHT -- DISASTER STRUCK--!
"A ZINGARAN FLEET CAME INTO THE BAY, DROVE OUR SHIPS AWAY, AND SENT A LARGE PARTY ASHORE TO PURSUE US.
"THEY WERE HEAVILY ARMORED -- THE ONES YOU CALL THE CONQUADORES...
"AT ANY RATE, THEY WERE ON US ALMOST BEFORE WE KNEW OF THEM.
"ONE OF MY MEN SNATCHED THE PLUNDER AWAY AND HID IT IN AN OLD TEMPLE --
"--AND THEN WE SCATTERED, EACH BAND FOR ITSELF, GLAD TO ESCAPE WITH OUR NAKED LIVES!

IN TIME, WITH MOST OF MY CREW, I WAS PICKED UP BY MY SHIP, WHICH CAME SLINKING BACK AFTER ESCAPING FROM THE ZINGARANS.
AS FOR BLACK ROJ -- WELL, HE WASN'T QUITE SO LUCKY.
I WAS ON MY WAY BACK THERE WHEN YOU OVER-HAULED ME, SO THE TREASURE'S STILL THERE.
YOU COULD JUST BE TELLING THE TRUTH...
OBVIOUSLY, I'VE STAKED MY LIFE ON THE FACT THAT I HAVE.
NOW, WHERE IS THIS BAY?
SHOW ME ON THIS MAP OF THE BLACK COAST!
I SEE YOUR ZINGARAN MAPS ARE NOT AS ACCURATE AS THOSE OF THE BARACHANS... BUT IT'S NEAR THIS POINT.
DOM CASTILLIUS' HEAD IS WITHIN REACH NOW... BUT THE CIMMERIAN'S PLANS HAVE CHANGED.
WHILE THERE'S A CHANCE, HOWEVER SLIM, FOR LIFE...!
VERY WELL! YOU MAY YET EARN A PRECARIOUS HOLD ON LIFE AND A BERTH ON THIS SHIP.
TAKE HIM BELOW!
WILL YOU TRULY KEEP YOUR WORD, DOM CASTILLIUS?
WHAT DO YOU THINK, CALIFO?
A BUCCANEER COMMISSIONED BY THE KING OF ZINGARA IS NOT BOUND BY A PROMISE TO A MERE PIRATE.
ONCE THE TREASURE OF DAGON IS ABOARD THE WEST WOLF, SIRS, I VOW HE SHALL SWING FROM A YARD-ARM!
BREAKING PROMISES, OF COURSE, IS HARDLY NEW TO THE MAN CALLED DOM CASTILLIUS.
AFTER ALL, WAS HE NOT ONCE KNOWN INDEED AS BASQUS THE BUTCHER?

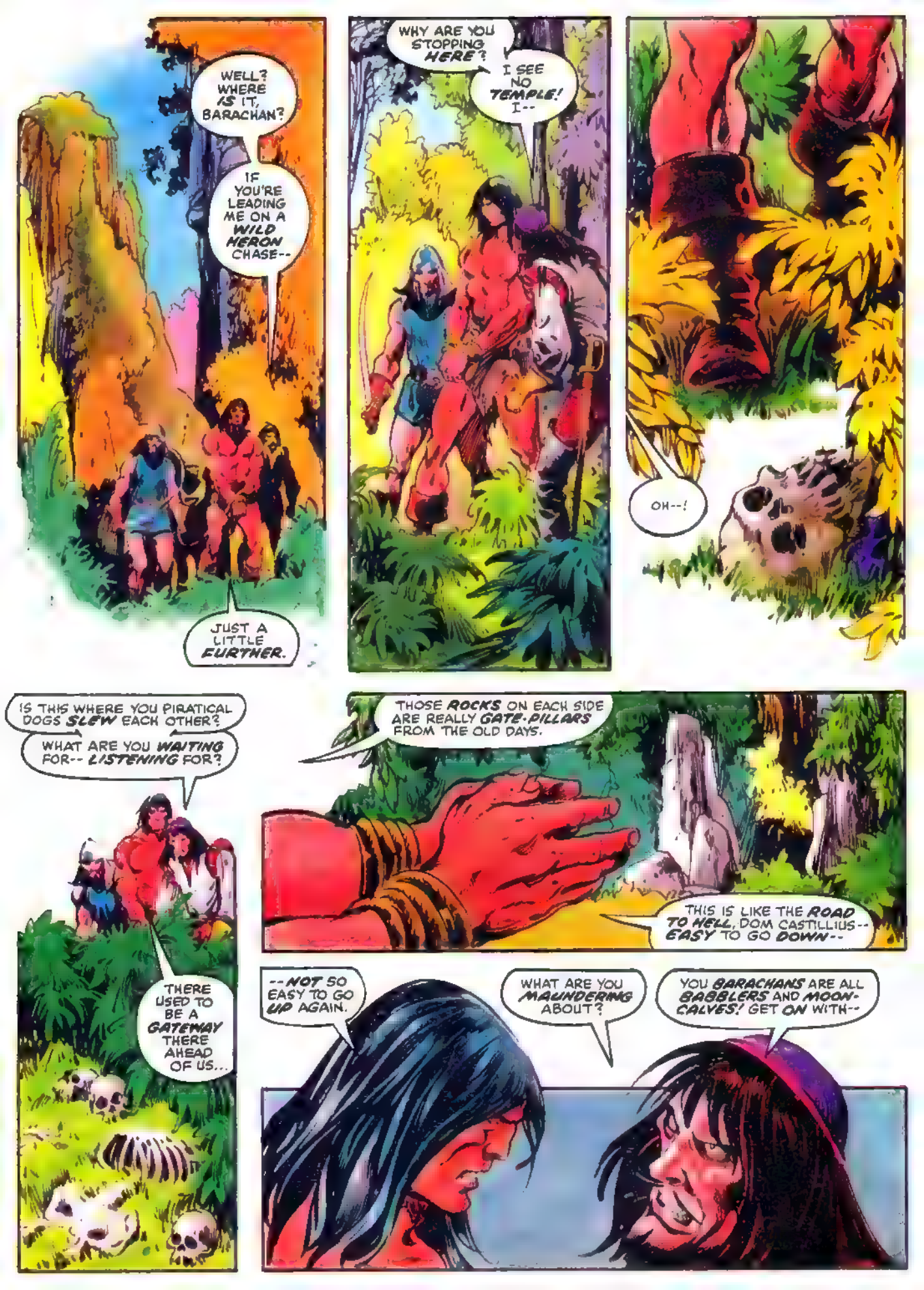
PART II

SKULLS AND ARROWS

TEN DAYS LATER, ZINGARAN ANCHORS RATTLE DOWN IN THE NAMELESS BAY DESCRIBED BY CONAN.
IT SEEMS DESOLATE ENOUGH TO BE THE COAST OF AN UNINHABITED CONTINENT... AS DENSE JUNGLE CROWDS THE NARROW STRIP OF WHITE SAND WHICH IS THE BEACH.
DAWN IS A PALE MIST ON THE WATER WHEN A PARTY OF MOSTLY-ARMED MEN FINDS A BARELY-VISIBLE PATH INTO THE THICKNESS.
TELL ME, DOM CASTILLIUS-- SINCE YOU INSIST ON USING THE NAME YOUR OAFISH KING GAVE YOU--
WHY DO YOU NEED FIFTEEN MEN TO BRING BACK WHAT ONE OR TWO STRONG MEN COULD CARRY?
I TAKE NO CHANCES, BARACHAN DOG...

I'M SIMPLY PROVIDING AGAINST ANY ABORTIVE ATTEMPT YOU MIGHT MAKE TO ESCAPE.
BESIDES, THERE IS ALWAYS THE CHANCE OF SAVAGES... BESIDES YOURSELF, I MEAN.
NOT ON THIS STRETCH OF COAST.
TELL ME, CONAN-- DID YOU EVER PLY THE BLACK COAST HERE WITH ANY REGULARITY?
I USED TO SAIL BY, NOW AND THEN.
CURIOUS... IF YOU'D MADE A NAME FOR YOURSELF HEREABOUTS, I'M SURPRISED I DIDN'T HEAR OF YOU.
WAIT! IF THIS COAST IS DESERTED, AS YOU CLAIM, HOW CAME THIS PATH HERE?
IT IS ALL THAT REMAINS OF AN OLD ROAD, BUILT BY THE VANISHED RACE WHICH REARED THE CITY BEYOND.
LET THE NUMBER OF MEN BE ON YOUR HEAD, THEN...
YOAAOOO

DENSE WALLS OF VEGETATION ALONG THE PATH SHUT OFF THEIR VIEW...
NOR DO DOM CASTILLIUS OR HIS MEN GLIMPSE THE FURTIVE, SHADOWY SHAPES WHICH NOW GLIDE ALONG THRU THE JUNGLE ON EITHER HAND.
CONAN IS AWARE OF THEIR PRESENCE, BUT SAYS NOTHING...
...MERELY CONTINUES TO WORK, CAREFULLY AND SUBTLY, AT THE CORDS ON HIS SINEWY WRISTS.
HE HAS BEEN DOING THIS ALL DAY, AND CAN FEEL THEM SLOWLY GIVING WAY.
AT LAST, AS THE SUN FINALLY HANGS LOW IN THE JUNGLE BRANCHES...
WHY DO YOU STOP, DOG?
THERE, DOM CASTILLIUS!
DOWN YONDER RAVINE LIES THE OLD TEMPLE WHERE THE JEWELS YOU SEEK ARE HIDDEN.
ON, THEN, MEN! ONWARD!
I WOULD SEE THE TALONS OF DAGON -- WHILE THERE IS STILL DAYLIGHT!
SO, CONAN MUSES GRIMLY TO HIMSELF...
AVARICE STILL MAKES FOR CREDULITY, AS IT EVER DID.


WELL? WHERE IS IT, BARACHAN?
IF YOU'RE LEADING ME ON A WILD HERON CHASE--
JUST A LITTLE FURTHER.
WHY ARE YOU STOPPING HERE?
I SEE NO TEMPLE! I--
OH--!
IS THIS WHERE YOU PIRATICAL DOGS SLEW EACH OTHER?
WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR-- LISTENING FOR?
THERE USED TO BE A GATEWAY THERE AHEAD OF US...
THOSE ROCKS ON EACH SIDE ARE REALLY GATE-PILLARS FROM THE OLD DAYS.
THIS IS LIKE THE ROAD TO HELL, DOM CASTILLIUS-- EASY TO GO DOWN--
--NOT SO EASY TO GO UP AGAIN.
WHAT ARE YOU MAUNDERING ABOUT?
YOU BARACHANS ARE ALL BABBLERS AND MOON-CALVES! GET ON WITH--

SUDDENLY, FROM THE JUNGLE: A SHARP TWANG-- AND SOMETHING WHINES VENOMOUSLY DOWN THE GULCH, TO END ITS FLIGHT WITH A VICIOUS THUD...
:URRK--!:
SAVAGES!!
YOU CALL THOSE POOR-SPIRITED, SKULKING DOGS TRUE SAVAGES?
LYING JACKAL! LOOK AT THAT! YOU SAID THERE WERE NO SAVAGES HERE-ABOUTS!
BEST GIVE THEM A VOLLEY, BUTCHER, BEFORE THEY GROW TOO BOLD.
AYE! WE CIVILIZED MEN HAVE MADE MANY IMPROVEMENTS ON THE CRUDE BOWS OF KUSHITES.
FIRE, DAMN YOUR HIDES! FIRE!
BUT, AS ZINGARAN ARROWS RATTLE FUTILELY AMONG THE LEAVES, ONLY A FEW SEVERED FRONDS DRIFT DOWN.
ONE CANNOT KILL... WHAT ONE DOES NOT SEE.
YET, EVEN AS ALL TWANGING CEASES, THERE IS AN AGONIZED SNAPPING OF FRAYED CORDS--
UNNH!
--AND THE MAN GUARDING CONAN SO SMUGLY LEARNS THAT HE HAS BEEN LIVING, ALL THIS TIME, IN A FOOL'S PARADISE.
GGAAA

WHAT--?
CONAN--FREE!?
AYE, BUTCHER! AND, SINCE YOUR MAN HERE HAS NO LONGER ANY USE FOR HIS SWORD--!
GET HIM!
KILL HIM!!
THEY'LL HAVE TO BE BETTER SHOTS THAN THAT, BUTCHER!
DOG! WE'LL FIND THE TREASURE WITHOUT YOUR HELP--
--AND LEAVE YOU HERE AS PREY FOR THE SAVAGES WHEN THEY RETURN!
THE ZINGARAN'S ONLY ANSWER IS A MOCKING LAUGH FROM A FOE UNSEEN..
YOU CAN'T FIND SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T EXIST!
THERE NEVER WERE ANY JEWELS; IT WAS ALL A LIE TO DRAW YOU INTO A TRAP!
BLACK ROJ NEVER CAME HERE--ONLY I DID, AND THE SAVAGES SLAUGHTERED ALL MY CREW IN THAT RAVINE--AS YOUR OWN WILL DIE, ERE LONG--BUTCHER!
YOU BETRAYED WHITE MEN TO BROWN-SKINNED SAVAGES!?

WHAT'S SKIN-COLOR TO ME, BUTCHER?
I WAS RAISED IN THE NORTH-LAND-- AND YOUR CIVILIZED WAYS ARE AS STRANGE TO ME AS THOSE OF THE SAVAGES--
--STRANGER, IN MANY WAYS!
RIGHT NOW, THOUGH, YOU'D BETTER GET BACK TO THE SHIP AND PREPARE TO REPEL BOARDERS.
THERE ARE ENOUGH SAVAGES IN THIS PLACE TO EAT YOUR WHOLE SHIP'S COMPANY FOR LUNCH!
AS FOR ME-- I GAMBLED MY NECK AND TOOK MY CHANCES WITH ALL OF YOU...
THAT'S WHY I ADVISED YOU TO BRING ONLY A HANDFUL OF MEN ASHORE; I WANTED TO SPARE AS MANY AS POSSIBLE.
AFTER ALL, IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN ME THAT ARROW HIT...
SO, IF I WERE YOU, I'D--
YAAAAAAAAAAA
MITRA'S MANTLE!
DID ONE OF THE SAVAGES KILL THAT LYING--?

NO, I GUESS NOT.
DAMN!

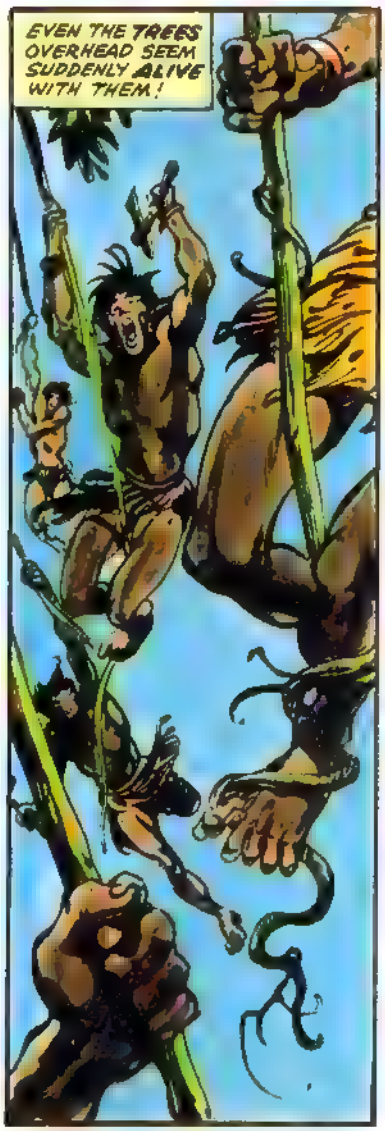
DON'T WASTE YOUR PRECIOUS TIME WORRYING ABOUT ME, BUTCHER!
YOU'VE OTHER THINGS TO CONCERN YOU NOW--
--AND HERE THEY COME!

JUST THEN, A BLOOD-CURDLING ULULATION BURSTS FORTH FROM THE JUNGLE--AND A STORM OF ARROWS COMES WHISTLING INTO THE RAVINE--!

ABOVE THE SOUND OF FLYING ARROWS AND THE DYING CRIES OF MEN--THERE IS THE MAN WHO CALLS HIMSELF DOM CASTILLIUS...
FIRE, BLAST YOUR EYES!
THEY'RE ONLY SAVAGES!

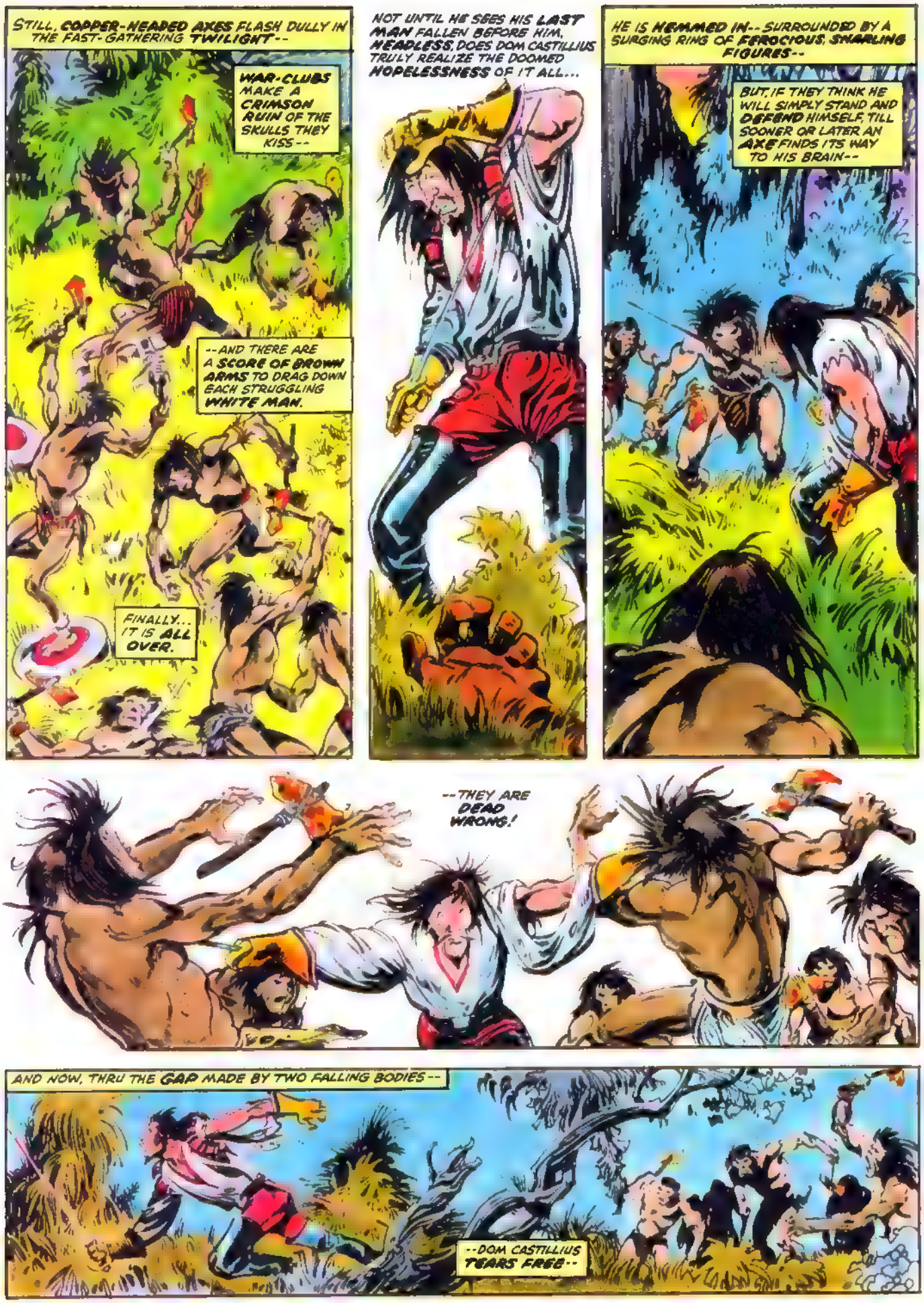
AND, INDEED, MORE THAN ONE ZINGARAN ARROW DOES FIND ITS DUSKY MARK...

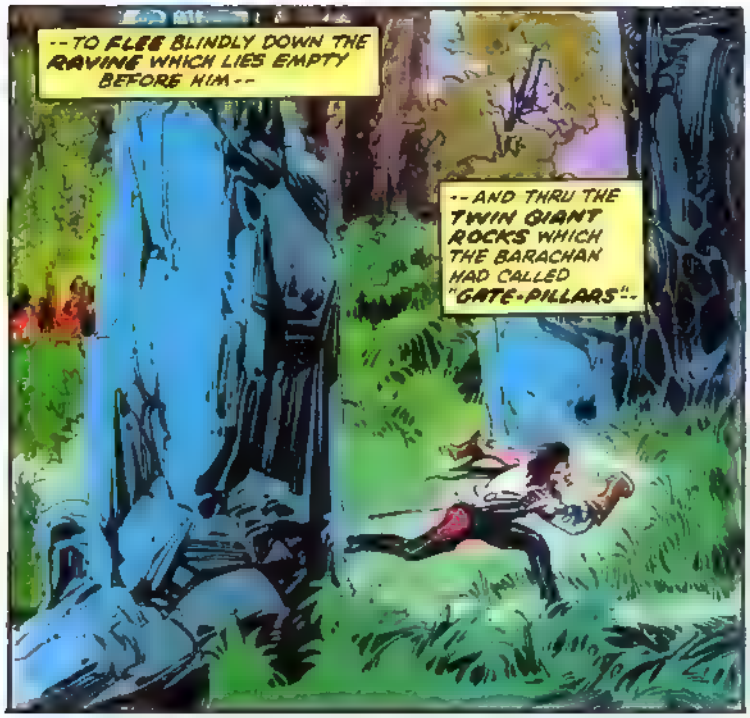
PERHAPS IT IS THE PIERCING DEATH-YELL WHICH BRINGS THE INFURIATED WARRIORS OUT OF THE JUNGLE...
PERHAPS THEY ARE ASHAMED TO LURK HIDDEN ANY LONGER FROM SO FEW PALE-SKINNED FOES...
AT ANY RATE, NOW THEY CHARGE DOWN THE RAVINE-- A WAVE OF BRAWNY BROWN BODIES-- HUNDREDS OF THEM AGAINST THE FEW ZINGARANS LEFT--!


EVEN THE TREES OVERHEAD SEEM SUDDENLY ALIVE WITH THEM!

THE ZINGARANS RISE NOW, WITHOUT ORDERS--
--MEETING DEATH WITH THE STUBBORNNESS OF A RACE STEEPED IN CHIVALRY.

AND DOM CASTILLIUS. FOR ALL THAT HE WAS ONCE RIGHTLY CALLED A BUTCHER--
--BRINGS DOWN TWO ATTACKERS FOR EVERY ONE SLAIN BY A FELLOW ZINGARAN!


STILL, COPPER-HEADED AXES FLASH DULLY IN THE FAST-GATHERING TWILIGHT--
WAR-CLUBS MAKE A CRIMSON RUIN OF THE SKULLS THEY KISS--
--AND THERE ARE A SCORE OF BROWN ARMS TO DRAG DOWN EACH STRUGGLING WHITE MAN.
FINALLY... IT IS ALL OVER.
NOT UNTIL HE SEES HIS LAST MAN FALLEN BEFORE HIM, HEADLESS, DOES DOM CASTILLIUS TRULY REALIZE THE DOOMED HOPELESSNESS OF IT ALL...
HE IS HEMMED IN-- SURROUNDED BY A SURGING RING OF FEROCIOUS, SNARLING FIGURES--
BUT, IF THEY THINK HE WILL SIMPLY STAND AND DEFEND HIMSELF, TILL SOONER OR LATER AN AXE FINDS ITS WAY TO HIS BRAIN--
--THEY ARE DEAD WRONG!
AND NOW, THRU THE GAP MADE BY TWO FALLING BODIES --
--DOM CASTILLIUS TEARS FREE--


--TO FLEE BLINDLY DOWN THE RAVINE WHICH LIES EMPTY BEFORE HIM--
--AND THRU THE TWIN GIANT ROCKS WHICH THE BARACHAN HAD CALLED "GATE-PILLARS"--

--AS FEAR LENDS WINGS TO HIS FEET!

THEN, STONE WALLS RISE AHEAD OF HIM--
--STONE WALLS REARED BY THE HAND OF MAN, AND NOT OF NATURE.

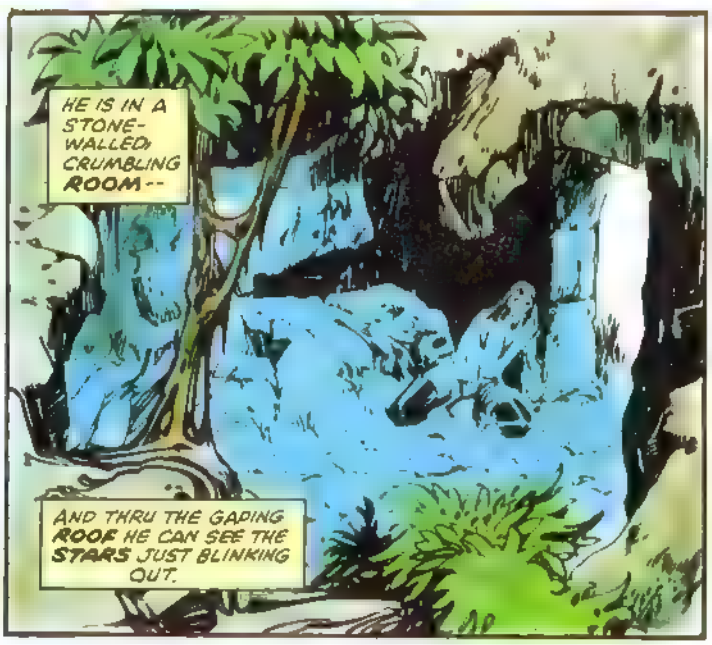
WITHOUT AN INSTANT'S HESITATION, THE ZINGARAN HURLS HIMSELF TOWARD A DARKLY BECKONING DOORWAY--

--AND INTO THE SHADOWED CHAMBER BEYOND!

THE BLOOD HAMMERS AGONIZINGLY IN HIS TEMPLES AS HE TURNS TO LOOK FEARFULLY BACK TOWARD THE NIGHT-SHROUDED JUNGLE.
MOMENT BY MOMENT, HE EXPECTS TO SEE IT THRONGED WITH FIERCE FACES-- WITH SWARMING, AXE-WIELDING FIGURES...

BUT THE PATH THERE LIES EMPTY... AND THE FEARSOME CRIES OF THE VICTORIOUS SAVAGES DRAW NO NEARER.
FOR SOME REASON, THEY HAVE NOT FOLLOWED HIM THRU THE ANCIENT GATEWAY.

SUDDENLY, TERROR THAT THEY MIGHT BE CREEPING UP BEHIND HIM CAUSES HIM TO WHEEL--
BUT NO ONE IS THERE.

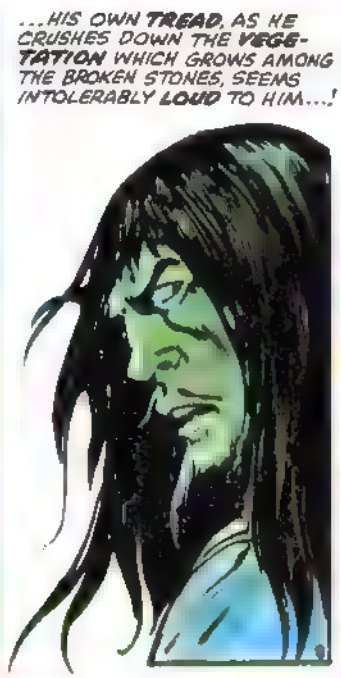

HE IS IN A STONE-WALLED, CRUMBLING ROOM--
AND THRU THE GAPING ROOF HE CAN SEE THE STARS JUST BLINKING OUT.

SILENCE BROODS NOW OVER THE RUINS... AND IN THE RAVINE BEYOND, AS WELL.
"WHY?" HE ASKS HIMSELF.
"WHY DO THE SAVAGES NOT PURSUE ME?"
FOR A SECOND MORE, PANIC CLAWS AT THE BUCCANEER'S SPINE...

THEN, REASON PREVAILS AGAIN. FOR, WHY DWELL THUS ON DEATH, IF HE HAS EVEN TEMPORARILY ESCAPED IT?
BETTER FAR TO EXPLORE THE DOORWAY AT HIS REAR... SEE WHERE IT LEADS.

THE ADJOINING ROOM HAS NO OUTLET INTO THE OPEN.
ALL ITS DOORS LEAD INTO STILL OTHER CHAMBERS, EQUALLY RUINOUS... WITH SHATTERED ROOFS, CRACKED FLOORS, AND CRUMBLING WALLS.

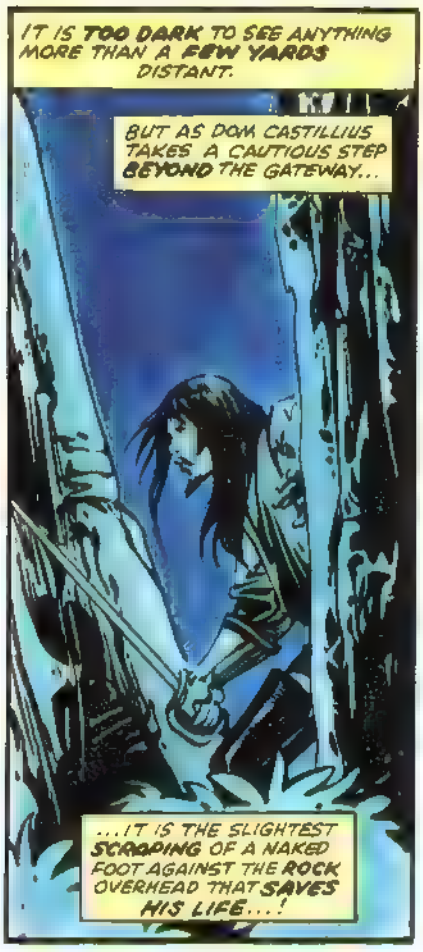
SEVERAL OF THESE HE TRAVERSES, AND AS HE DOES SO...


...HIS OWN TREAD, AS HE CRUSHES DOWN THE VEGE-TATION WHICH GROWS AMONG THE BROKEN STONES, SEEMS INTOLERABLY LOUD TO HIM...!

AT LAST, HE RETURNS TO THE ROOM THAT OPENS TOWARD THE RAVINE.
THERE IS NO SOUND FROM THAT DIRECTION.
BUT, IT'S SO DARK--!

AT LAST, HE CAN ENDURE THE SUSPENSE NO LONGER.
WALKING AS QUIETLY AS HE IS ABLE, HE LEAVES THE VINE-ENCRUSTED RUINS...

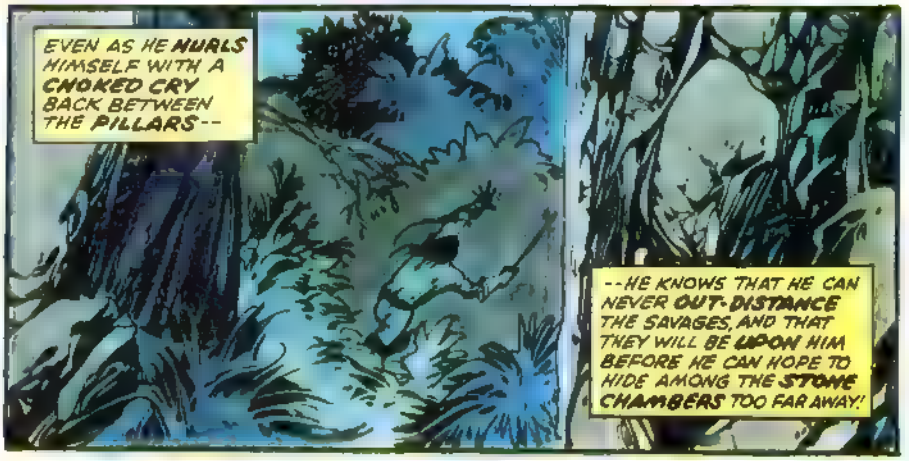
...TO STAND ANEW BETWEEN THE GATE-PILLARS, AND STRAIN HIS EYES INTO THE RAVINE BEYOND...!


IT IS TOO DARK TO SEE ANYTHING MORE THAN A FEW YARDS DISTANT.
BUT AS DOM CASTILLIUS TAKES A CAUTIOUS STEP BEYOND THE GATEWAY...
...IT IS THE SLIGHTEST SCRAPING OF A NAKED FOOT AGAINST THE ROCK OVERHEAD THAT SAVES HIS LIFE...!

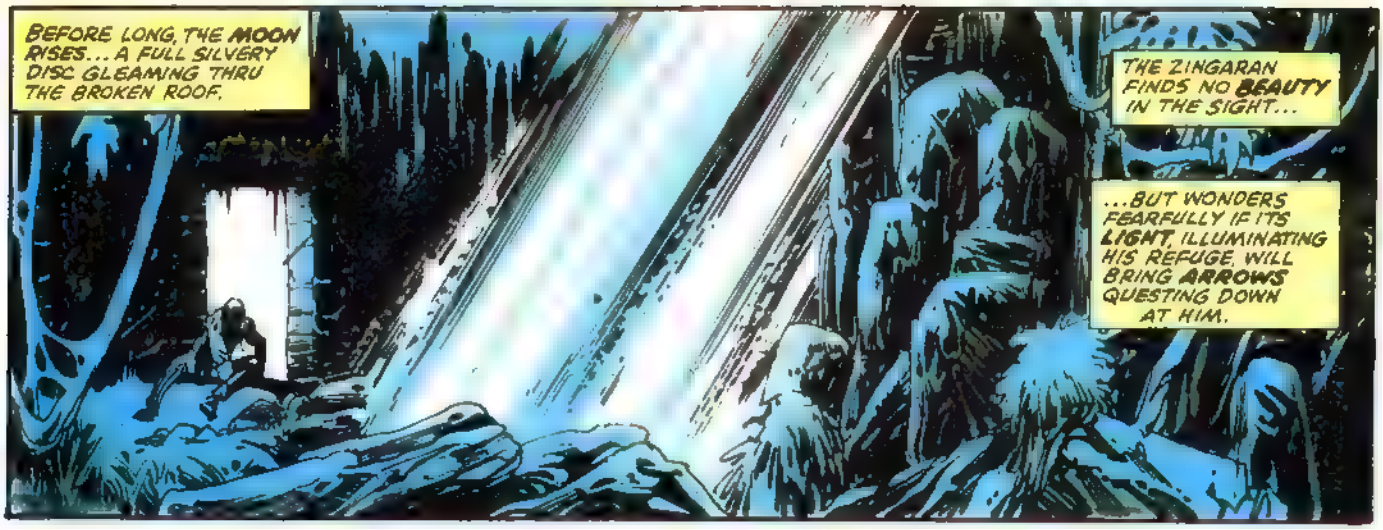
MOTHER OF MITRA!

YET, EVEN AS HIS KORDAVO-TRAINED SWORD-ARM FLASHES FLAWLESSLY UPWARD, TO DEAL ITS STEELY DEATH--
AAI'I'I!

--HE TURNS TO BEHOLD OTHER FIGURES-- SOLID, NIGHTMARISH RANKS OF THEM-- SURGING INEXORABLY TOWARD HIM!
OH GODS-- GODS--!


EVEN AS HE HURLS HIMSELF WITH A CHOKED CRY BACK BETWEEN THE PILLARS--
--HE KNOWS THAT HE CAN NEVER OUT-DISTANCE THE SAVAGES, AND THAT THEY WILL BE UPON HIM BEFORE HE CAN HOPE TO HIDE AMONG THE STONE CHAMBERS TOO FAR AWAY!

IN HIS HASTE, HE STUMBLES AND FALLS PELL-MELL...
THERE, HE LIES DUMB AND QUAKING -- CLENCHING HIS TEETH AGAINST THE SHARP AGONY HE EXPECTS IN THE SHAPE OF A SPEAR-THRUST.
NONE COMES.
INCREDIBLY, THEY ARE WAITING -- BEYOND THE GATEWAY --
BUT THEY WILL NOT PASS THRU IT -- NOT EVEN TO GLUT THEIR BLOOD-LUST.
STUMBLINGLY, HE MAKES HIS WAY BACK TO THE GAPING BLACK DOOR WHICH LEADS INTO THE RUINS...
...FORCING HIMSELF TO OVERCOME A SUDDEN, INSTINCTIVE AVERSION TO ENTERING THE DARKENED CHAMBER.
LIKE MOST MEN OF THE HYBORIAN AGE, DOM CASTILLIUS MORE THAN HALF BELIEVES IN GHOSTS.
AND HE FEELS THAT, IF EVER THERE WAS A PLACE FIT TO BE HAUNTED BY THE PHANTOMS OF A LOST AND FORGOTTEN RACE..
...IT IS THESE SULLEN RUINS!

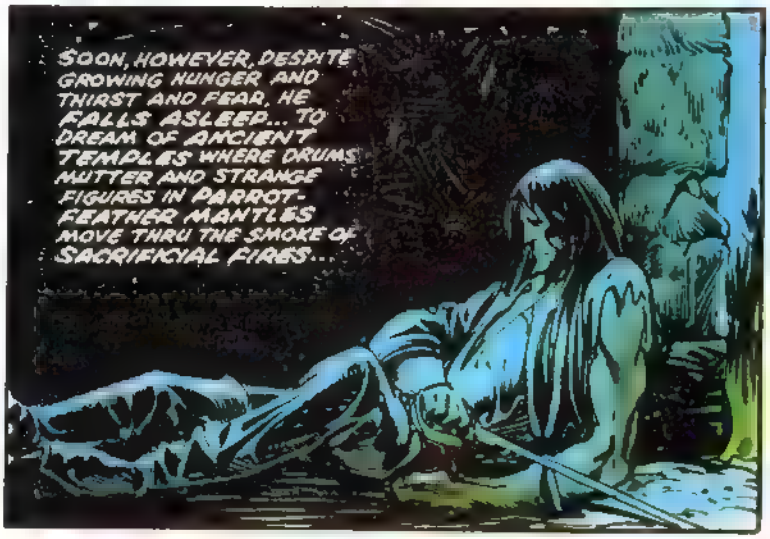

BEFORE LONG, THE MOON RISES... A FULL SILVERY DISC GLEAMING THRU THE BROKEN ROOF.
THE ZINGARAN FINDS NO BEAUTY IN THE SIGHT...
...BUT WONDERS FEARFULLY IF ITS LIGHT, ILLUMINATING HIS REFUGE, WILL BRING ARROWS QUESTING DOWN AT HIM.

YET, EXCEPT FOR THE FAR, LONE CRY OF A NIGHTBIRD, THE JUNGLE OUTSIDE IS SILENT.
AFTER AN ETERNITY THE BUCCANEER EDGES TOWARD THE DOORWAY BEHIND HIM...

...AND SURVEYS THE HIDING-PLACE WHICH MAY WELL BECOME HIS TOMB:

APPARENTLY THE RAVINE, AFTER IT PASSES THE ANCIENT GATE-PILLARS, OPENS INTO A BROAD BOWL, WALLED BY SHEER CLIFFS...
...UNBROKEN CLIFFS!
THE RUINS IN WHICH HE FINDS HIMSELF ALMOST FILL THE BOWL... BUT NONE OF THEM REACH HIGH ENOUGH TO ENABLE HIM TO ESCAPE THE TRAP.

HE REMEMBERS THE MOCKING WARNING OF CONAN:
"THIS IS LIKE THE ROAD TO HELL, DOM CASTILLIUS-- EASY TO GO DOWN-- NOT SO EASY TO GO UP AGAIN!"


SOON, HOWEVER, DESPITE GROWING HUNGER AND THIRST AND FEAR, HE FALLS ASLEEP... TO DREAM OF ANCIENT TEMPLES WHERE DRUMS MUTTER AND STRANGE FIGURES IN PARROT-FEATHER MANTLES MOVE THRU THE SMOKE OF SACRIFICIAL FIRES...

AND HE DREAMS AT LAST OF A SILENT, HIDEOUS SHAPE WHICH COMES TO THE INNER DOOR OF HIS ROOFLESS CHAMBER...
...TO REGARD HIM WITH COLD, INHUMAN EYES...!

IT IS FROM THIS DREAM THAT HE AWAKENS WITH AN INCOHERENT CRY--
--TO FIND HIMSELF BATHED IN COLD SWEAT.
MEMORY OF THE DREAM IS ALREADY VAGUE... BUT TERRIFYING.
HAD HE ACTUALLY SEEN A SHADOW SWAY IN THE DOORWAY, TO VANISH AS HE AWOKE...
...OR HAD IT BEEN ONLY PART OF HIS NIGHTMARE?
NOTHING STIRS THRU THE INNER DOORWAY...
SO HE HEADS OUT INTO THE STYGIAN DARKNESS BEYOND THE OTHER--
--ONLY TO STUMBLE OVER SOMETHING STRETCHED IN THE GRASS OUTSIDE!
EVEN IN THE SHADOWS THERE, HE CAN TELL HE STUMBLED OVER... A DEAD MAN!
BUT, THAT IS ALL HE CAN TELL.
A SCORE OF MEN MIGHT BE LURKING AN ARM'S LENGTH AWAY FROM HIM... BUT THERE IS NO SOUND.
THE FEAR OF IT SUDDENLY OVERWHELMS HIM, EVEN MORE THAN HIS CURIOSITY CONCERNING THE DARK CORPSE BEFORE HIM--

--AND HE LUNGES-- STUMBLES-- **COLLAPSES** BACK INTO THE **RUINED CHAMBER**--

--TO FIND HIMSELF **OVERWHELMED BY PANIC!**

IT IS NOT SHEER **IMAGINATION**, THEN, WHICH PEOPLES THESE GHASTLY RUINS WITH SINISTER NOISELESS SHAPES-- AND SPY UPON HIM AS HE SLEEPS!

DESPERATELY, THE ZINGARAN VOWS THAT HE WILL SLEEP **NO MORE** THIS NIGHT...

BUT IT IS A PROMISE EASIER **MADE** THAN **KEPT.**

AT LAST, **DAWN** FLOODS THE JUNGLE... CREEPING EVEN INTO THE CHAMBER WHERE **DOM CASTILLIUS** SLEEPS BUT DOES NOT REST.

HIS EYES OPEN **SLOWLY** AS WEARY AS WHEN HE **CLOSED** THEM...

...ONLY TO **GAPE WIDELY** AT THAT WHICH LIES AT HIS VERY **FEET:**

A DISH OF **COOKED MEAT**... STILL **SMOKING** FAINTLY...

...AND A NEWLY-CUT, HOLLOWED **GOURD!**

WITH A STRANGLED CRY, HE IS **UP**...

WHERE **ARE** YOU-- **WHOEVER** YOU BE?

SHOW YOURSELF!

BUT ONLY AN **EMPTY CHAMBER** GREETS HIS EYES...

AND, NEXT MOMENT, SIGHT OF **WATER** AND SCENT OF **FOOD** DRIVES FROM HIS MIND ALL THOUGHTS OF ANYTHING BUT HIS **PHYSICAL NEEDS**...

WHAT THE **MEAT** IS, HE NEITHER KNOWS NOR CARES.

IT HAS EVIDENTLY BEEN ROASTED OVER AN **OPEN FIRE**, WITHOUT SALT OR SEASONING... BUT TO THE RAVENOUS MAN, IT TASTES LIKE **FOOD OF THE GODS.**

AND, HAVING EATEN AND DRUNK, HE **LIES DOWN** AGAIN.

HIS **WORLD** HAS CRUMBLED ABOUT HIM... HIS HOPED-FOR TREASURE A **LIE**, HIMSELF CAUGHT LIKE A **RAT IN A TRAP.**

WORN OUT WITH VAIN RAGINGS AGAINST FATE... HE **SLEEPS.**

PART III

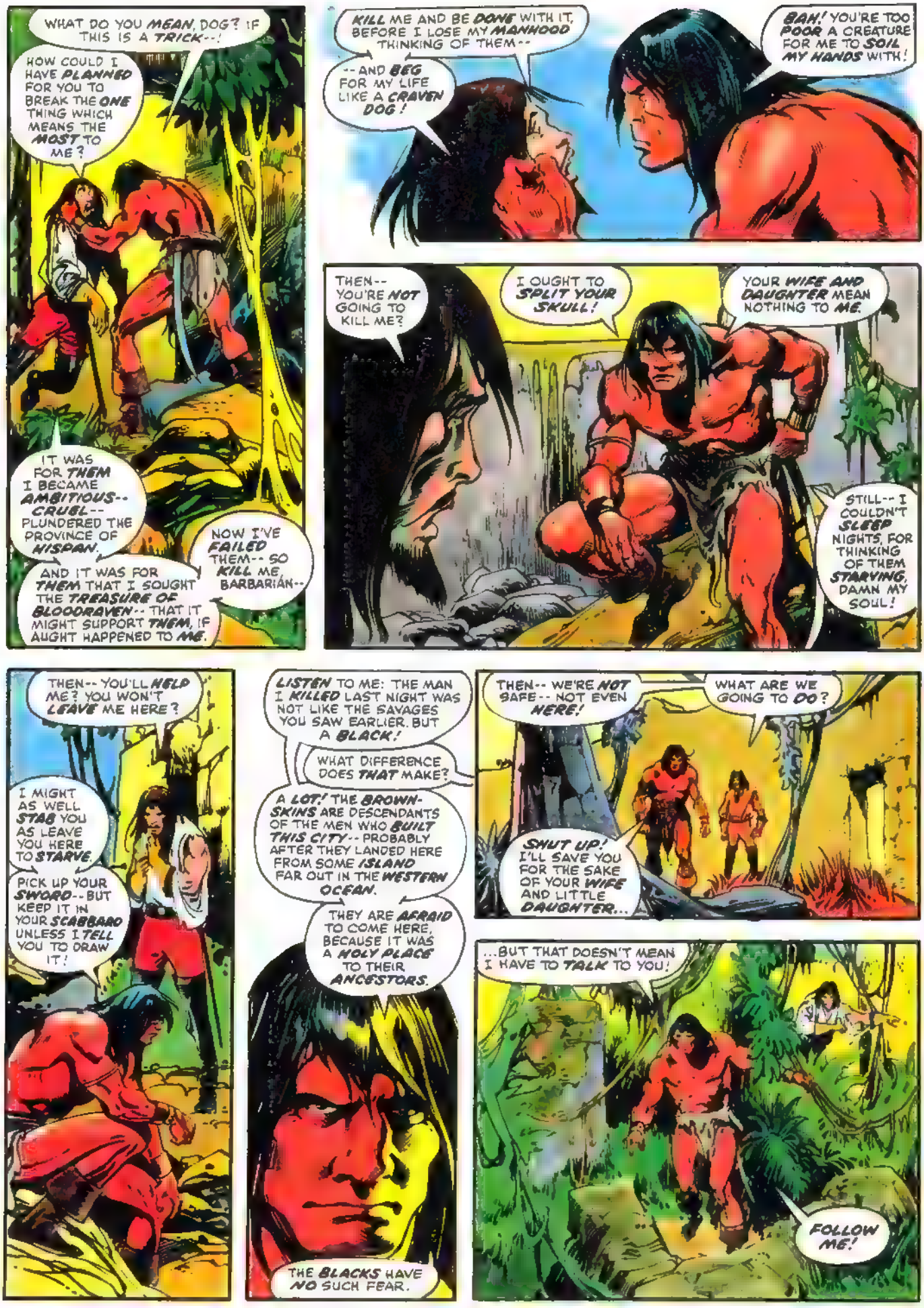
THE SLITHERER IN DARKNESS

THE SUN IS HIGH WHEN THE ZINGARAN SUDDENLY AWAKES AGAIN -- TO SIT UPWARD WITH A STARTLED OATH AT THE TALL BRONZED FIGURE WHICH STANDS LOOKING DOWN AT HIM...
CONAN THE BARACHAN!
SNATCHING AT HIS SWORD, DOM CASTILLIUS SPRINGS UP -- FOR, THOUGH HIS MIND IS A RIOT OF MADDENING EMOTIONS, STILL HE IS PHYSICALLY A NEW MAN -- AND NERVED TO A RAGE THAT IS TINGED WITH NEAR-INSANITY...!

YOU BARBARIAN DOG! SO THE SAVAGES DIDN'T CATCH YOU ON THE CLIFFS!
HARDLY! THEY MERELY HAVE THESE RUINS SURROUNDED.
ONCE I FLED PAST THE GATE-PILLARS, I WAS SAFE-- AND SINCE THEN, I'VE COME AND GONE AS I PLEASED.
I COOKED YOUR BREAKFAST-- AND MINE-- RIGHT UNDER THEIR NOSES, AND THEY NEVER SAW ME.
IT WAS YOU!? BUT-- WHY??
WELL, FIRST I THOUGHT IT WOULD SATISFY ME IF I SAW YOU GET AN ARROW THRU YOUR GUTS.
THEN, I THOUGHT I'D WAIT AND WATCH WHILE YOU STARVED TO DEATH HERE, TREMBLING WITH FRIGHT.
YET-- YOU KILLED THAT MAN OUT THERE-- SAVED ME WHILE I SLEPT--?!
AYE-- BECAUSE I DECIDED THAT WATCHING YOU STARVE WASN'T ENOUGH!
I WANTED TO KILL YOU MYSELF-- TO REVENGE MYSELF FOR MY MEN WHOM YOU HAD SLAIN.
THEY WEREN'T MUCH, PERHAPS-- BUT THEY WERE MINE!
THEN WHY DID YOU FEED ME-- GIVE ME DRINK--?
WHAT SATISFACTION IS THERE IN CUTTING DOWN A MAN HALF-DEAD WITH WANT?
THEN IT WAS YOU WHOSE SHADOW I SAW AT THE INNER DOOR JUST BEFORE THE MOON SANK!?
NOT I! I WAS OUTSIDE THE RUINS THEN--
--SLAYING THE DOG WHO CAME TO SLAY YOU!
BUT, ENOUGH OF THIS USELESS TALK--
YOU'RE FED NOW-- CROM KNOWS YOU'VE RESTED LONG ENOUGH-- AND NOW--
--NOW I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!!

IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, FOOL -- YOU'VE JUST PRONOUNCED YOUR OWN DOOM!
A ZINGARAN ONCE OF THE KING'S COURT IS MORE THAN A MATCH FOR ANY OAFISH BARACHAN!
PERHAPS YOU'RE A BETTER SWORDSMAN THAN MOST BARACHANS, DOG --
BUT, I'VE BEEN FAR MORE THAN A MERE PIRATE IN MY DAY!
I'VE BEEN A MERCENARY, SELLING MY BLADE TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER --
--FROM SHEM TO THE SHORES OF THE VILAYET--
AND MOST OF THE CIVILIZED SWORDSMEN I'VE MET UP WITH--
--ARE NOW BUT FOOD FOR THE WORMS!
WELL? DON'T JUST CRINGE AGAINST THE WALL, BUTCHER!
PICK UP YOUR SWORD!
ARE YOU SO SHAKEN WITH FEAR THAT YOU DON'T EVEN NEAR ME?
PICK UP YOUR SWORD!

BAH! CAN'T YOU EVEN FIGHT?
I SWEAR BY CROM-- I'LL KILL YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS!
UHHHNN--!!
SUDDENLY, WITH A WORDLESS SCREAM, THE ZINGARAN LAUNCHES HIMSELF AT THE TOWERING CIMMERIAN--
--IN VAIN!
YOU CRINGING SWINE!
GET UP!
GET UP, YOU HANGMAN OF PEASANTS AND CHILDREN, BEFORE I SET MY BOOT-HEEL ON YOUR FACE--!
WHAT ARE YOU REACHING FOR, INSIDE YOUR SHIRT? IF IT'S A KNIFE, I'LL--
BUT IT IS NOT A KNIFE...
AND, CROUCHING OVER THE OBJECT HE HAS DRAWN FORTH, DOM CASTILLIUS BEGINS TO WEEP IN GREAT, RACKING SOBS...!
WHAT THE HELL?
LET ME SEE THAT!
NNOOO-- PLEASE--!
WELL, I'LL BE DAMNED!
IT'S SOME KIND OF PAINTED MINIATURE--CRACKED BY MY BLOW, BUT NOT ENOUGH TO RUIN THOSE BEAUTIFUL FACES!
YOUR WIFE AND DAUGHTER!?
Y-YES! I HAVE-- ENDURED MUCH WITHIN THE L-LAST NIGHT AND DAY... BUT, THE BREAKING OF THE PORTRAIT I EVER CARRY OVER MY HEART...
I DIDN'T KNOW BUTCHERS HAD WIVES AND CHILDREN.
THE LASS IS BUT FIVE... I'VE NOT SEEN THEM IN A YEAR AND MORE...
HOLY MITRA, WHAT'S TO BECOME OF THEM NOW??

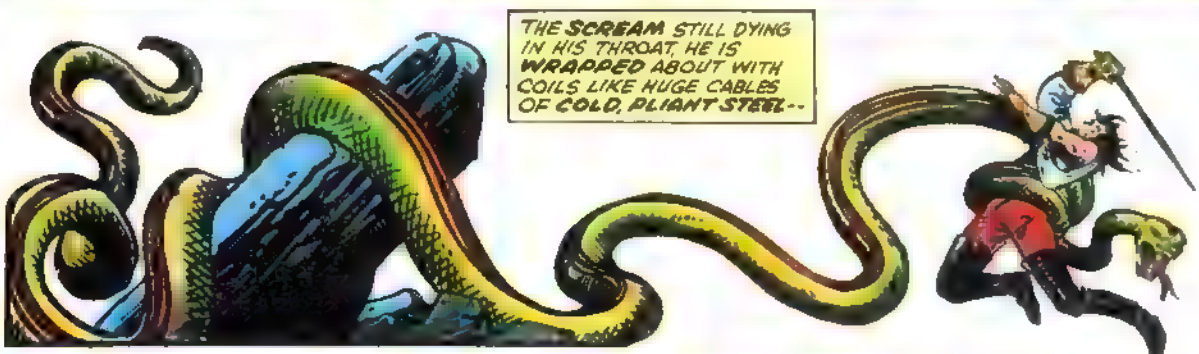

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, DOG? IF THIS IS A TRICK--!
HOW COULD I HAVE PLANNED FOR YOU TO BREAK THE ONE THING WHICH MEANS THE MOST TO ME?
IT WAS FOR THEM I BECAME AMBITIOUS-- CRUEL-- PLUNDERED THE PROVINCE OF HISPAN.
AND IT WAS FOR THEM THAT I SOUGHT THE TREASURE OF BLOODRAVEN-- THAT IT MIGHT SUPPORT THEM, IF AUGHT HAPPENED TO ME.
NOW I'VE FAILED THEM-- SO KILL ME, BARBARIAN--
KILL ME AND BE DONE WITH IT, BEFORE I LOSE MY MANHOOD THINKING OF THEM--
--AND BEG FOR MY LIFE LIKE A CRAVEN DOG!
BAH! YOU'RE TOO POOR A CREATURE FOR ME TO SOIL MY HANDS WITH!
THEN-- YOU'RE NOT GOING TO KILL ME?
I OUGHT TO SPLIT YOUR SKULL!
YOUR WIFE AND DAUGHTER MEAN NOTHING TO ME.
STILL-- I COULDN'T SLEEP NIGHTS, FOR THINKING OF THEM STARVING, DAMN MY SOUL!
THEN-- YOU'LL HELP ME? YOU WON'T LEAVE ME HERE?
I MIGHT AS WELL STAB YOU AS LEAVE YOU HERE TO STARVE.
PICK UP YOUR SWORD-- BUT KEEP IT IN YOUR SCABBARD UNLESS I TELL YOU TO DRAW IT!
LISTEN TO ME: THE MAN I KILLED LAST NIGHT WAS NOT LIKE THE SAVAGES YOU SAW EARLIER. BUT A BLACK!
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE?
A LOT! THE BROWN-SKINS ARE DESCENDANTS OF THE MEN WHO BUILT THIS CITY-- PROBABLY AFTER THEY LANDED HERE FROM SOME ISLAND FAR OUT IN THE WESTERN OCEAN.
THEY ARE AFRAID TO COME HERE, BECAUSE IT WAS A HOLY PLACE TO THEIR ANCESTORS.
THE BLACKS HAVE NO SUCH FEAR.
THEN-- WE'RE NOT SAFE-- NOT EVEN HERE!
WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?
SHUT UP! I'LL SAVE YOU FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR WIFE AND LITTLE DAUGHTER...
...BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU!
FOLLOW ME!

HOW WOULD YOU KNOW-- YOU, WHO GROVEL ON YOUR KNEES?
BY THE GODS! THERE'S NOT EVEN ENOUGH ROOM IN THIS CHAMBER FOR A MAN TO WALK ERECT.
WHEN I CAME HERE BEFORE, FLEEING AFTER ALL MY OWN MEN WERE SLAUGHTERED, I STUMBLED IN HERE.
I DON'T THINK EVEN THE BLACKS, WHO COME FROM TIME TO TIME FROM OVER THE NEARBY MOUNTAINS, KNOW ABOUT--
--YONDER STAIRWAY, WHICH LEADS OUTSIDE TO THE CLIFFS.
WHY DO YOU HESITATE? WHY DON'T WE CLIMB IT NOW-- SEEK TO CLIMB THE CLIFFS, AND HIDE AMONG THE TREES?
I COULD GET THRU ALONE... BUT NOT DRAGGING YOU BEHIND ME.
NO, WE'LL WAIT TILL NIGHTFALL, AND THEN MAKE OUR RUN FOR IT.
AND, IF I MYSELF DIE, BECAUSE OF NOTHING MORE THAN A BROKEN PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER AND CHILD...
...I'VE ONLY MYSELF TO BLAME!
JUST THEN, FROM OUTSIDE THE RUINED CITY, A DRUM BEGINS TO SOUND...
IN TIME, THE DRUM CEASES TO THROB... AND EVENING COMES ON, RIPENING SLOWLY TO TWILIGHT.
BACK IN THE LOW HILLS, BEHIND THE RING OF CLIFFS, A FIRE GLINTS UNDER THE DUSKY TREES, CASTING BROWN AND BLACK FACES INTO SHARP RELIEF...
I CAME SWIFTLY WHEN I HEARD THE DRUM.
I KNEW IT WAS N'ONGA WHO CALLED ME.
N'ONGA'S DRUMTALK TOLD ME THAT A WHITE MAN WAS AT BAY... AND MY MAN AJUMBA, WHO LINGERED WITH YOUR TRIBE, WAS DEAD.
I CAME IN HASTE... AND NOW YOU TELL ME YOU DARE NOT ENTER WHAT YOU CALL THE OLD CITY!
I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT A DEVIL DWELLS THERE -- AND HE HAS CHOSEN THE WHITE MAN FOR HIS OWN!

I DO NOT FEAR YOUR DEVIL, WHATEVER HE MAY BE!
A DAY AND A NIGHT HAVE PASSED SINCE THE WHITE MAN FLED INTO THE OLD CITY.
WHY HAS NOT YOUR DEVIL DEVOURED HIM-- OR THE OTHER ONE WHO YOU SAY LINGERS ON THE CLIFFS?
THE DEVIL IS NOT HUNGRY NOW!
WHEN HE IS HUNGRY AGAIN, HE WILL TAKE THEM -- THIS I KNOW.
YOU ARE A STRANGER IN THIS COUNTRY; YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THESE THINGS.
I UNDERSTAND THIS, OLD MAN--
I, BIGOMBA, AM A SON OF A KING IN THE LAND BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS!
I HAVE SEEN AJUMBA'S BODY... AND I KNOW HE WAS SLAIN BY A WHITE MAN.
WHEN THE MOON RISES AGAIN, WE WILL HUNT BOTH WHITE MEN LIKE RATS THRU THE CRUMBLING RUINS!
AND, WHEN DUSK HAS DEEPENED INTO EARLY DARKNESS...
EASY NOW, BUTCHER-- IT'S DARK AS HELL IN THIS SHAFT!
BUT-- THAT SLAB ABOVE YOUR HEAD-- TWO OF MY MEN COULDN'T LIFT IT!
YOUR MEN ARE WEAKLINGS, MADE SOFT BY WINE AND WOMEN.
NOT THAT I'VE ANYTHING AGAINST EITHER. BUT I--
WITHOUT A SOUND, THE BLACK WARRIOR AIMS A GLEAM OF STEEL AT THE CIMMERIAN'S BREAST--
DAMN!
--ONLY TO FIND HIMSELF SEIZED, AND HURTLING INTO THE OPENING--

-- SO THAT, NEXT INSTANT, THREE FORMS OF DIFFERING HUES GO TUMBLING DOWN THE STONE STAIRWAY --
--TO LAND IN A SPRAWLING HEAP.
HE'S DEAD! BUT YOU SAID THE SAVAGES NEVER--
HE'S NOT ONE OF THE NATIVES.
HE'S A BLACK-- LIKE THE MAN I KNIFED.
CURSE ME, I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THERE'D BE MORE OF THEM! THEY--
CONAN! SPEARS!
THIS WAY, DOG!
LET THEM COME THRU THE SLAB-OPENING, IF THEY WANT TO!
BUT-- WE COULD BLOCK IT! WE--
THEN THEY'D JUST COME BY THE RAVINE, AND BE HARDER TO STOP.
NO, BEST WE GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO COME THIS WAY FIRST.
IF THERE'S ONLY A FEW OF THEM--!
AYE! I'LL LET YOU KNOW IF THEY COME THAT WAY!
GO INTO THE CHAMBER WHERE YOU SLEPT, AND WATCH THE RAVINE!
DOM CASTILLIUS FEELS HIS FLESH CRAWL AS HE MAKES HIS WAY THRU THE DIM CHAMBERS, WHERE SHADOWS LIE THICK ACROSS HIS PATH...
AT LAST, REACHING THE PROPER ROOM, HE STARES AT THE OUTER DOOR, WHERE NO FURTIVE SHAPES CAN YET BE SEEN...
...WHEN SUDDENLY, AT A SOFT SOUND BEHIND HIM --
YYAAAA!!

OUT OF THE DARKNESS OF A CORNER RISES A LONG, SWAYING FORM WITH A WEDGE-SHAPED HEAD --
IN ONE BRAIN-STAGGERING SECOND, THE MYSTERY OF THE RUINS BECOMES CLEAR TO THE ZINGARAN:
WHAT GLIDED AWAY FROM HIS DOOR AS HE AWOKE -- AND WHY THE BROWN SAVAGES FEAR THIS DEAD PLACE.
HE IS FACE TO FACE WITH THE DEVIL OF THE DESERTED CITY-- AND IT IS HUNGRY AT LAST!


THE SCREAM STILL DYING IN HIS THROAT, HE IS WRAPPED ABOUT WITH COILS LIKE HUGE CABLES OF COLD, PLIANT STEEL--

AND THEN-- CONAN IS THERE!
BONES OF CROM!

DON'T DIE OF SHEER FRIGHT, BUTCHER!
I'LL SAVE YOU IF I CAN!
AT THE FEEL OF THE BARBARIAN'S NAKED SWORD BITING INTO HIS CONSTRICTING FORM --

-- THE HUGE DEVIL-SNAKE COMES AT CONAN LIKE THE RUSH OF A NURRICANE ALONG THE STONES AND GRASS--
--ITS FANGS BETRAYING IT AS ONE OF THE POISONOUS CONSTRICTORS LONG SINCE THOUGHT EXTINCT!

AVOIDING THOSE VENOMOUS FANGS WITH A PANTHERISH SPRING, CONAN LASHES OUT WITH HIS CUTLASS--
--WHICH NEWS DEEP INTO THE MIGHTY NECK.
ROLLING ASIDE, THE MONSTER FLEES THRU THE INNER DOOR, WITH A LOUD RUSHING SOUND THRU THE THICK VEGETATION...
...AND THE CIMMERIAN IS AFTER IT, HIS BERSERK FURY FULLY ROUSED!
WH-WHERE ARE YOU GOING, MAN? LET IT GO!
TO LET IT RETURN LATER, AND TAKE US BY SURPRISE?
DON'T BE A FOOL!
BESIDES, THAT DEMON-SERPENT MAY BE OUR WAY OUT OF THIS TRAP!
HOW, IN THE NAME OF THE GODS?
LOOK! THERE IT GOES--
--INTO THAT WINE-COVERED DOORWAY I NEVER SAW BEFORE!
LET IT GO THEN, BARACHAN, AND BE DAMNED TO IT!
DON'T YOU SEE? THERE'S NOTHING IN THESE RUINS THAT EVEN A SNAKE CAN EAT AND DRINK.
HE HAS TO GO OUT INTO THE JUNGLE-- AND THIS MAY BE HIS PATH.
HOW DO YOU KNOW HE DOESN'T GO THE SAME WAY I ENTERED?
HIS BODY WOULD HAVE WORN A PATH I COULD SEE-- AND IT HASN'T.
NOW, FIND A BRANCH FOR ME, SO WE CAN MAKE A TORCH--
--AND WE'LL FOLLOW THAT FIEND INTO HIS DARK HOLE.
AND IF WE MEET HIM AGAIN-- OR A NEST OF THEM--?
HELL, WE'VE GOT TO DIE SOME TIME.
AND, IF WE WAIT HERE MUCH LONGER, THE KUSHITES WILL BE CUTTING OUR THROATS!

AND INDEED, IN THE MOONLIT CHAMBER THEY HAVE JUST QUITTED...
I SAW THEIR TORCH VANISH INTO THAT DOOR, BIGOMBA!
BUT, ALONE AS I WAS, I RAN TO TELL YOU.
AND THE BLOOD-DROPS HERE INDICATE THEY HAVE MET AND FOUGHT THE DEVIL OF THE RUINS...
ONE OF YOU-- GATHER THE REST OF MY WARRIORS, AND BRING THEM AFTER ME-- WITH TORCHES!
AS FOR ME, I WILL FOLLOW WITH THE OTHER THREE.
BIGOMBA SEES AS WELL AS A LION IN THE DARK!
AS, BEHIND A FAST-SPUTTERING TORCH, SOME DISTANCE AWAY...
THE BLOOD TRAIL LEADS THIS WAY. COME!
THEN, THEY BRANCH OFF INTO THIS SMALLER CORRIDOR.
THAT'S THE WAY THAT SLITHERING DEVIL WENT!
MITRA, MAN-- I FEEL AS IF WE'RE PURSUING OUR OWN DEATHS! WE--
WAIT-- LOOK! THERE, AHEAD OF US--
LIGHT!
IT MUST BE MOONLIGHT, FINDING ITS WAY SOMEHOW INTO THE TUNNEL.
IF YOU'RE TOO AFRAID, BUTCHER, YOU CAN WAIT FOR ME HERE WHILE I--
NO, I DIDN'T THINK YOU WOULD.
IT WAS MOONLIGHT, ALL RIGHT, BUTCHER--
--AND THIS CHAMBER WAS ITS SOURCE!
DAMN!

I DON'T BLAME YOU MUCH FOR SWEARING.
IT'S COMING FROM THAT SHAFT UP THERE-- TOO HIGH TO REACH!
IT LOOKS AS IF THIS ISN'T OUR WAY OUT, AFTER ALL.
SO, LET'S SEE WHAT'S OVER THIS--
GODS! IT'S SOME SORT OF HEATHEN IDOL-- BUT SO HUGE-- SO BESTIAL--!
CROM'S DEVILS!
NEVER MIND THE LIFELESS IMAGE OF A DEAD GOD, MAN--
IT'S THIS NECKLACE AROUND ITS STONE NECK THAT INTERESTS ME!
YOU'RE RIGHT! THOSE GEMS-- SO LARGE-- CAN THEY POSSIBLY BE REAL?
BUT, YOU SAID THERE WERE NO JEWELS IN THIS PLACE!
HELL, BUTCHER-- EVEN I AM NOT RIGHT ALL THE TIME!
I THOUGHT I LIED WHEN I TOLD YOU THERE WERE GEMS HERE-- AND INDEED, THESE ARE NOT THE FABLED TALONS OF DAGON...
WH-WHAT ARE YOU DOING??
STILL, THEY'LL FETCH A TIDY FORTUNE ANYWHERE NORTH OF STYGIA!

HERE'S HALF OF THEM.
IF WE GET OUT OF HERE ALIVE, THAT WILL PROVIDE FOR THE WIFE AND CHILD.
YOU HATE ME-- CALL ME BUTCHER--
YET YOU SAVE MY LIFE, THEN GIVE ME THIS--?
SHUT UP!
I'M NOT GIVING IT TO YOU, BUT TO-- THEM!
AND DON'T THANK ME, CURSE YOU, OR I'LL CHANGE MY MIND!
I STILL HATE YOU AS MUCH AS I--
SHH-- LISTEN--!
MEN-- COMING DOWN THE TUNNEL!
I HOPE THEY DIDN'T SEE OUR TORCH.
MAYBE THEY DIDN'T. IT WASN'T MUCH MORE THAN A COAL IN THE MOONLIGHT.
STRAINING THEIR EYES DOWN THE TUNNEL, THE TWO FUGITIVES SEE FOUR SHADOWS BULKING OUT OF THE BLACKNESS BEYOND, IN SINISTER SILENCE.
AT A GESTURE FROM THE TALLEST, TWO SHADOWS MOVE OFF DOWN THE CORRIDOR, OUT OF SIGHT...
FOR A MOMENT CONAN AND DOM CASTILLIUS DARE TO HOPE THE REMAINING SHADOWS WILL PASS THEM BY.
BUT THOSE HOPES DIE A-BORNING AS THEY COME DIRECTLY UP THE TUNNEL...
THEY'RE BOUND TO FIND US, SOONER OR LATER.
WE'VE GOT TO GET THEM FIRST-- AND FAST!
YOU TAKE THE WARRIOR-- I'LL TAKE HIS CHIEF--

--NOW!!

BIGOMBA, MIGHTIEST FIGHTER OF A MOUNTAIN RACE, TENSES FOR ACTION AT CONAN'S IMPETUOUS SHOUT...
HIS COMPANION WARRIOR, HOWEVER, IS TOO STUNNED FOR A MOMENT TO ACT...

...TILL THE BITE OF STEEL IN HIS SIDE BRINGS HIM TO HIS SENSES.

BUT THEN, EVEN AS HE SCREAMS AND LUNGES MADLY--

--IT IS TOO LATE!

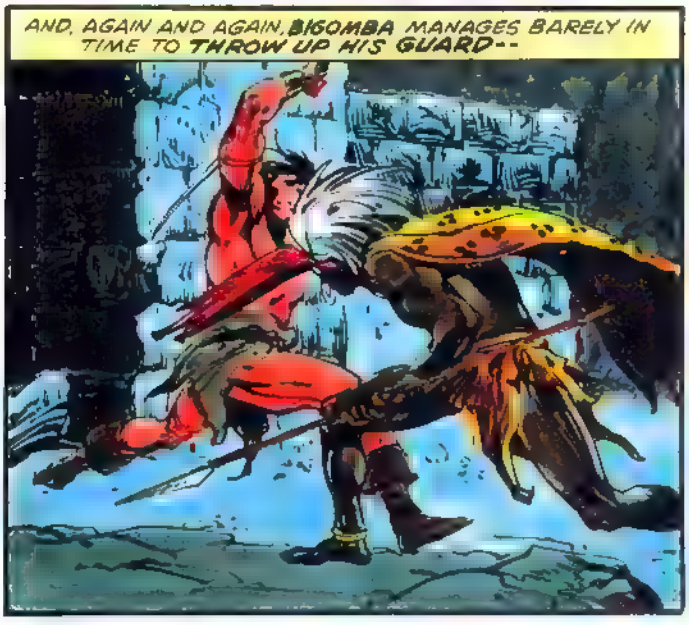
BIGOMBA, HOWEVER, IS QUICKER-WITTED THAN HIS FOLLOWER.
HIS SHIELD CATCHES THE DOWN-SWINGING CUTLASS OF THE ATTACKING CORSAIR...

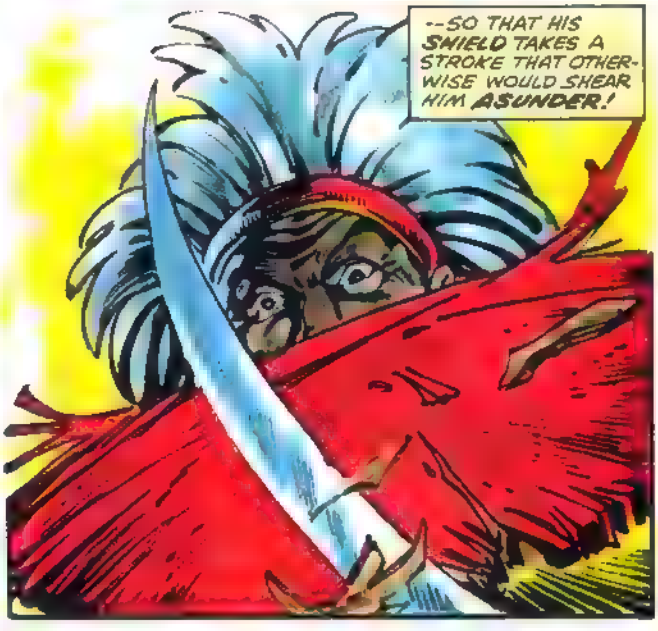
...AND HE COUNTERS WITH A FEROCIOUS LUNGE THAT SCRAPES BLOOD FROM THE CIMMERIAN'S NECK EVEN AS HE DUCKS ASIDE!

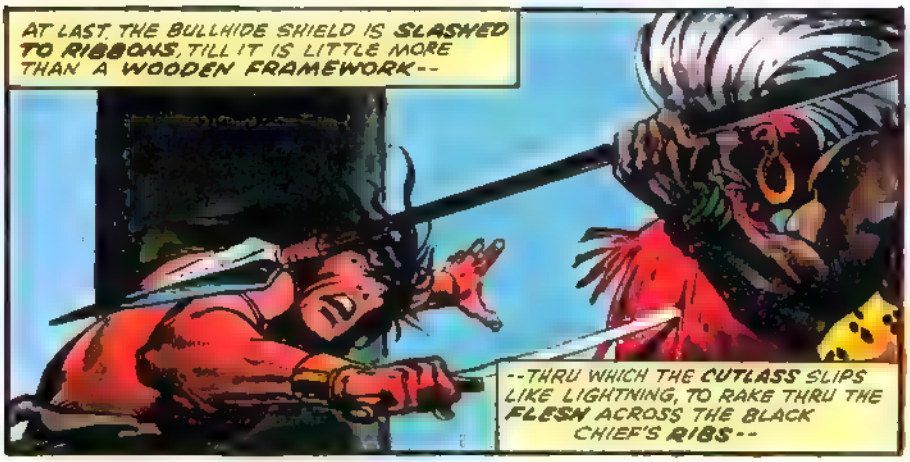
ALL THE WHILE, THE VICTORIOUS DOM CASTILLIUS CIRCLES WARILY...
...UNABLE TO GET IN A THRUST WHICH MIGHT NOT IMPERIL CONAN.

THE TWO GIANT WARRIORS FIGHT ON IN GRIM SILENCE...
...EACH MOVING WITH THE SURE-FOOTED QUICKNESS OF TIGERS...

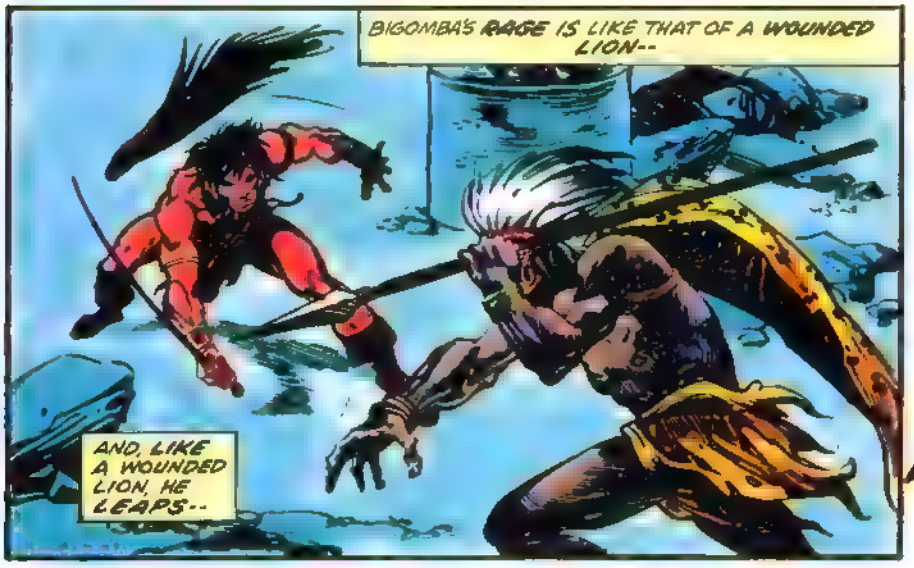
IN THE MOONLIGHT, THE GREAT MUSCLES OF BOTH MEN KNOT, RIPPLE, AND COIL IN RESPONSE TO THEIR HERCULEAN EXERTIONS.
AGAIN AND AGAIN, THE PIRATE BARELY AVOIDS THE DARTING OF THE LONG SPEAR...


AND, AGAIN AND AGAIN, BIGOMBA MANAGES BARELY IN TIME TO THROW UP HIS GUARD--


--SO THAT HIS SHIELD TAKES A STROKE THAT OTHERWISE WOULD SHEAR HIM ASUNDER!


AT LAST, THE BULLHIDE SHIELD IS SLASHED TO RIBBONS, TILL IT IS LITTLE MORE THAN A WOODEN FRAMEWORK--
--THRU WHICH THE CUTLASS SLIPS LIKE LIGHTNING, TO RAKE THRU THE FLESH ACROSS THE BLACK CHIEF'S RIBS--

--TO DRAW FIRST BLOOD!
SPAWN OF AJUJO!


BIGOMBA'S RAGE IS LIKE THAT OF A WOUNDED LION--
AND, LIKE A WOUNDED LION, HE LEAPS--

--THROWING ALL HIS GIANT BODY BEHIND THE ARM WHICH DRIVES THE SPEAR--
--TOWARD THE BARBARIAN'S BRONZED CHEST!
THE ZINGARAN, WATCHING MESMERIZED, CANNOT BELIEVE CONAN CAN AVOID THE LUNGE...

BUT A CROM-SENT THUNDERBOLT IS SLOW COMPARED TO THE PIRATE'S AGILE SIDE-STEPPING--

AND THEN, HIS CUTLASS IS A BLINDING FLICKER OF STEEL IN THE MOONLIGHT--
--ENDING ITS ARC IN A SLAUGHTER-HOUSE CRUNCH!
GGAAAA

BIGOMBA FALLS AS A TREE FALLS... AND LIES STILL.
HIS HEAD HAS BEEN ALL BUT SEVERED FROM HIS BODY.
ISHTAR! FOR ONCE-- I THOUGHT I'D MET A MAN--ALMOST MY MATCH--!
WE'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE THE REST OF THEM COME.
THAT SMALLER CORRIDOR MUST LEAD TO THE OUTSIDE-- BUT THOSE BLACKS ARE IN IT, AND WE HAVEN'T A TORCH...
WHAT ABOUT THIS DOOR?
IT'S DOUBTLESS THICK-- BUT IT ALSO LOOKS ROTTEN.
AYE, LET'S TRY IT!
THEN, AS THE ANCIENT PORTAL CRACKS AND SPLINTERS UNDER THE IMPACT OF CONAN'S HEAVY SHOULDER...
IT'S GIVING-- AND I CAN SMELL A DAMP RIVER-REEK BEYOND!
ONE MORE TIME, AND IT SHOULD--
LISTEN-- THOSE YELLS! THE LARGER BODY OF BLACKS MUST BE COMING TO JOIN THEIR CHIEF!
BREAK THE DOOR-- QUICKLY!
NO TIME! THEY'D BE ON US BEFORE WE GET THRU.

WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE OUR STAND OVER BY THE DOORWAY THEY'LL ENTER--
--AND HOPE WE CAN STOP THEM FROM USING THE WEIGHT OF NUMBERS AGAINST US.
GET READY, MAN-- TO DIE FIGHTING!
AS THE WARRIORS OF BIGOMBA SEE THEIR PREY AHEAD THEIR HOWLS GROW WILDER.
SPEARS ARE BRANDISHED AMONG THE TUNNELS WHICH GLIMMER AND FLARE IN THE TUNNEL...
AND THEN--
AAAAAA
WUWO! WHERE IS BIGOMBA? HE WAS WITH--
FLEE, MY BROTHERS! FLEE!
THE DEVIL! THE DEVIL OF THE RUINS!!
THE GREAT SERPENT HAS TURNED AT BAY AT LAST--
--AND YELLS OF HATE CHANGES TO SCREAMS OF TERROR!
NO COWARDS ARE THE WARRIORS OF BIGOMBA-- AND THEY HAVE FACED HOSTS IN BATTLE WITHOUT FLINCHING--
BUT THIS SLAVERING, SLITHERING CREATURE SEEMS LIKE A THING FROM BEYOND--

FOR, THOUGH WOUNDED MORTALLY, THE GIANT SNAKE CLINGS TO LIFE WITH THE HORRIBLE VITALITY OF ITS KIND--
--AND, IN THE BLIND FURY OF ITS DEATH THROES, BECOMES AN APPALLING ENGINE OF DESTRUCTION!
WITHIN A MATTER OF MOMENTS, THOSE BLACKS WHO SURVIVE HAVE BROKEN AWAY TO RUN DOWN THE TUNNEL...
AND THE REPTILE, UNLOOPING HIMSELF FROM HIS LIMP AND BROKEN VICTIMS, SWEEPS DOWN IT AFTER THE LIVING WHO FLEE FROM HIM.
IN SECONDS, BOTH FUGITIVES AND PURSUER HAVE VANISHED INTO THE DARKNESS...
...FROM WHICH FRANTIC YELLS COME FAINTLY BACK...!
MITRA! THAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED TO US!
I GUESS HE JUST GOT TIRED OF RUNNING...
OR ELSE HE KNEW HE HAD HIS DEATH-WOUND AND WANTED TO TAKE SOMEONE WITH HIM.
ALL I CARE ABOUT IS THAT WE'VE SEEN THE LAST OF THEM ALL!
NOW TO FINISH OFF THAT ROTTED DOOR--
--TO SEE IF THERE'S STILL A WORLD OUTSIDE THESE CRUMBLING, DEVIL-HAUNTED RUINS!

THREE POWERFUL DRIVES OF HIS SHOULDER-- AND THE ANCIENT DOOR FINALLY GIVES WAY!
FRESH, DAMP AIR POURS THRU, THOUGH THE INTERIOR IS DARK--

STILL, CONAN ENTERS WITHOUT HESITATION-- AND THE ZINGARAN FOLLOWS.
THAT HORRIBLE SMELL--!
THE SNAKE USED THIS TUNNEL-- AND THAT'S GOOD.
HE ALONE KNOWS THE SUREST ROUTE TO THE OUT-SIDE.

CROM! THERE MUST BE A REGULAR NETWORK OF SUBTERRANEAN ROOMS AND TUNNELS UNDER THESE CLIFFS.
I WONDER WHAT WE'D FIND IF WE EXPLORED ALL OF THEM.
I DON'T KNOW-- AND I DON'T CARE!
LET'S JUST GET OUT OF HERE!
BUT, IT'S SO DARK--
LOOK THERE!

WHERE? HOW CAN A MAN LOOK ANYWHERE IN THIS DARKNESS? I DON'T--
AHEAD OF US, DAMN YOU, BUTCHER!
THERE'S LIGHT-- FAR DOWN THE TUNNEL!
YOUR EYES ARE BETTER THAN MINE...!
THEY HAVE TO BE!

IT SEEMS HOURS THAT THEY STRIDE AND STUMBLE, BEFORE--
AN OPENING-- ENCRUSTED WITH VINES!
AYE-- WHICH MEANS THE JUNGLE IS OUTSIDE.
THIS IS THE WAY THAT DEVIL-SNAKE CAME, ALL RIGHT.

AND I'LL BE AS GLAD TO LEAVE THAT TUNNEL BEHIND ME AS TO SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY AGAIN.
AFTER ALL, I CAN'T BE SURE I GAVE THAT SNAKE ITS DEATH-WOUND!
COME!
DOM CASTILLIUS NEEDS NO PRODDING.

WHERE ARE WE, BARACHAN?
WE'RE BEYOND THE FOOT OF THE SLOPES...
MY SENSE OF DIRECTION IS HOPELESSLY MUDDLED.
...AND THAT MEANS WE'RE OUTSIDE THE CORDON WHICH THE SAVAGES STRUNG AROUND THE CLIFFS!
THAT NARROW STRIP OF BEACH DOWN THERE-- I'LL BET IT ONLY EXISTS IN DRY SEASONS.
WELL, THE MAIN THING IS THAT IT'S HERE NOW...
...AND THE COAST LIES IN THAT DIRECTION!
THE SUN HANGS HIGH ABOVE THE WESTERN HORIZON BY THE TIME TWO MEN EMERGE FROM THE JUNGLE THAT FRINGES THE BEACH...
...TO SEE THE TINY BAY STRETCHING BEFORE THEM.
WELL, MAN-- WE MADE IT!
AND THERE'S YOUR SHIP, LYING AT ANCHOR WHERE WE LEFT HER.
ALL YOU'VE GOT TO DO NOW IS HAIL HER FOR A BOAT TO BE SENT ASHORE...
--AND YOUR PART OF THE ADVENTURE IS OVER.
WHAT ABOUT YOU, CIMMERIAN?
AREN'T YOU COMING WITH ME?
BY MITRA, MAN-- I OWE YOU A DEBT THAT I CAN NEVER--

I HAVE MY SHARE OF THE JEWELED NECKLACE; YOU OWE ME NOTHING.
BESIDES, I DON'T TRUST YOU!
WHAT? DO YOU THINK I COULD EVER HARM YOU NOW-- AFTER THIS?
I'VE DONE TERRIBLE THINGS-- BEEN EVEN THE INHUMAN BUTCHER YOU CALL ME--
BUT, I WOULD NEVER--
AYE, YOU'RE GRATEFUL NOW... AND FULL OF THE MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS.
BUT YOU MIGHT CHANGE YOUR MIND, ONCE YOU GET BACK ON SHIP'S DECK.
DOM CASTILLIUS MIGHT TURN BACK INTO BASQUS THE BUTCHER!

I--I SWEAR TO YOU-- I--
THE ZINGARAN'S VOICE TRAILS OFF TO A DESPERATE NOTHINGNESS.
AT THIS MOMENT, HE SUDDENLY LOATHES HIMSELF FOR ALL THAT HE HAS BEEN...
...AND WANTS NOTHING IN THE WORLD SO MUCH AS THE FIRM HANDCLASP OF THE MAN WHO HAS SAVED HIS LIFE.
BUT, HE ALSO KNOWS...THAT HE DOES NOT DESERVE IT.

THEN, AS CONAN TURNS BACK TOWARD THE JUNGLE...
WAIT! YOU CAN'T STAY HERE...!
I'VE LIVED IN THE WILDS BEFORE NOW!
BESIDES, I'M NOT THE ONLY PIRATE IN THESE SEAS.
I CAN EASILY REACH A RENDEZVOUS-POINT YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT.

THE NEXT TIME YOU HEAR ABOUT ME...
...I'LL BE RAVAGING THE MERCHANT SHIPS OF ZINGARA, WITH A GOOD FAST SHIP AND A BLOODTHIRSTY CREW!
NEXT INSTANT CONAN VANISHES INTO THE RICH GREEN FOLIAGE WHILE THE BUCCANEER STARES SILENTLY AFTER HIM...

...DANGLING IN HIS HAND HALF A NECKLACE WHICH WILL BUY ANYTHING BACK IN THE CIVILIZED HYBORIAN WORLD.
ANYTHING... BUT RESPECT.